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# Transitioning to the Learning Organization

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## ABSTRACT

PETER SENGE POPULARIZED THE CONCEPT of the learning organization, and several libraries have tried, with varying degrees of success, to adopt the learning organization model. This article explores why organizations consider attempting to become learning organizations, includes an overview of the theory of learning organizations, presents steps to becoming a learning organization, and describes examples of learning organization efforts at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries and other libraries.

## LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS

To survive in the continuously changing information environment, libraries must find ways to become agile, flexible organizations. Rigid rules, entrenched bureaucracies, and stable hierarchies will not help these organizations survive new technologies, tight budgets, competition, and changing expectations of patrons and users. Stifling bureaucracies can result in employees who are unmotivated, lack the skills needed to adjust to changes, are content to follow orders, lack problem solving skills, and develop an *us vs. them* mentality. To advance, libraries need to move away from being *knowing* organizations that emphasize one best way to do things by following rules and regulations. They need to move past being *understanding* organizations where organizational culture and values dominate decision-making so that change is unlikely to occur. They need to advance past *thinking* organizations that emphasize fixing and solving problems without questioning why the system broke. Instead, they must become organizations that create a climate

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that fosters learning, experimenting, and risk taking. Instead of emphasizing command and control processes, libraries need to adopt strategies that will help the organization move forward and develop proactive responses to change. They need employees who appreciate change, accept challenges, can develop new skills, and are committed to the organization's mission, goals, and objectives.

The concepts of the learning organization can provide leaders, managers, and staff with the tools they need to develop organizations that can succeed in turbulent times. Learning organizations encourage their members to improve their skills so they can learn and develop. The staff become more flexible as they acquire knowledge and are more able to move around the organization. Interunit barriers are lessened as staff share experiences, knowledge, and skills. Creativity can flourish as staff are encouraged to take risks and try new things. Traditional communication barriers are also lessened as communication is encouraged between units and between staff levels. A rigid hierarchy no longer exists and no longer prevents change. New problems and new challenges can be met faster and resolved more quickly. And, most importantly, for today's librarians the customer or patron is the first priority for the organization. Good customer service becomes the foundation for all the organization needs to do.

## DEFINING THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION

What is a learning organization? A learning organization is an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights. Without accompanying changes in the way that work gets done, only the potential for improvement exists. Learning organizations translate new knowledge into new ways of behaving. In a learning organization, managers and staff encourage work-related learning, the exchange of information between employees to create new ideas and knowledge, and continuous improvement. Staff test experiences and use those experiences to improve the organization. Flexibility becomes a core value of the organization as staff accept and adapt new ideas and seek ways to enhance products and services. In a learning organization, people are appreciated for their skills, values, and work. Staff opinions are sought and are treated with respect. Exchanging information and sharing ideas and experiences throughout the organization is encouraged. People learn new skills they can apply to their jobs. They use these skills to enhance services and improve the organization. There are more opportunities for staff to be creative, to learn from mistakes, to take risks, and to reach new levels of expertise. In a learning organization, learning takes place at the individual, group, and organizational levels.

People in organizations *experience* two types of learning: maintenance learning and anticipatory learning. Maintenance learning is discovering better ways to do current procedures and tasks. Maintenance learning is

important in that it ensures that procedures and processes are efficient and being done the best way possible. Maintenance learning has a short-term focus, however, and often misses changes in the environment.

A learning organization encourages anticipatory learning. Here individuals acquire new knowledge and incorporate the new knowledge into the workplace so that the organization can reach its vision. Anticipatory learning is participatory, a joint venture in which individuals in a unit, department, or the organization as a whole explore alternatives, share ideas, and consider how new knowledge helps the organization reach its goals. To succeed, today's libraries need to emphasize anticipatory learning so that the organization can adjust to changing environments and reach the vision of the library of the future.

Why is it so difficult to foster learning in an organization? To answer that question, it is helpful to review the work *Organization Learning*, by Chris Argyis and Donald Schön (1978). In their theory on organizations, they describe learning as detecting and correcting errors (Senge, 2003, p. 47). Error correction is a very personal process. To correct an error, an individual must admit that he/she made a mistake. A manager has to admit that he/she is not infallible. The manager risks losing credibility. In most of our organizations, mistakes are viewed as personal failings to be fixed. Many performance evaluation systems emphasize error rates and limiting the number of mistakes, further creating a culture where denying errors is in the individual's best interest.

To succeed and grow, however, organizations must change this culture so that successes are emphasized and rewarded. Errors become opportunities to find better ways to accomplish tasks. Failures can become opportunities to learn and improve rather than career-ending events.

Learning, then, is about action. It is about taking the information we gather and using it to create knowledge management systems and statistical databases and then using that knowledge to improve the organization. Learning is about moving from data gathering to using data to effect needed changes. Effective learning is about communication, communicating about errors and failures, analyzing why systems fail, and using that information to make changes. In learning organizations individuals move from fearing mistakes to using problems and errors as information to inform decision-making, improve processes, and create success.

## THE FIFTH DISCIPLINE

Peter Senge, in his book *The Fifth Discipline* (1990a), outlines five component technologies or disciplines that are the foundation for building a learning organization. These five disciplines are: shared vision, personal mastery, mental models, group learning, and systems thinking. Senge's treatment of each discipline includes practices, underlying principles, and

the understanding of the discipline when one has achieved the highest levels of mastery (1990a, p. 6–11).

According to Senge, *personal mastery* is the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively (1990a, p. 7). In personal mastery one focuses on results while seeing the current reality. Understanding the creative tension between the current reality and the future goal is a key part of personal mastery. As one masters this discipline, one can see the connectedness in the organization between individual learning and organizational learning and the commitment of both the individual and the organization to organizational success. Personal mastery goes beyond rote learning. In personal mastery we may learn a new skill and learn how applying that skill to our work can move the organization forward. For example, learning to use an online chat reference service involves mastering the technology and understanding the mechanics of answering questions. In a learning organization staff will not stop at just learning the mechanics. They will also look at how an online chat reference service fits in with the entire array of reference services and how to best integrate this service with other services, including circulation and interlibrary loan activities.

*Mental models* refers to the assumptions and generalizations that influence how one understands and interprets the organization (Senge, 1990a, p. 8). Very often, we are not aware of our own mental models and the assumptions that underlie our actions. We act based on our subconscious model rather than on the theories we claim to believe. In learning about mental models, we need to turn inward, unearth the assumptions that guide our actions, examine those assumptions, and learn to think openly about our view of the world. As we look at our mental models we can begin to change them to develop a set of mental models shared by the team, work group, or organization. As we learn to unearth our mental models we can look more creatively at what can and cannot be done in our organization. We will not be limited by past assumptions and can look for more creative ways to address problems, find solutions, and change efforts. For example, in a library system with branch libraries, branch staff may have a mental model of the organization in which the main library is viewed as unsupportive. If branch staff believe main library staff do not respect their work, then branch staff may view any offer of assistance from the main library as a criticism of their work. In contrast, main library staff may think they are being supportive team members by offering assistance and will be surprised by the hostile response to their offer of help. These conflicting mental images of the library system can lead to conflict and create distrust. In a learning organization, staff would recognize these different views and develop a shared understanding of how to work together to make the organization stronger.

A *shared vision* makes it possible for members of the organization to

understand the future its leaders want to create (Senge, 1990a, p. 9). The leadership of the organization cannot dictate a shared vision. Instead, the vision develops from many people within the organization creating a picture of the future. All members of the organization must understand and contribute to the vision. The vision has to be meaningful to them and be something that relates to their individual visions of the organization. By working together to create the vision and then working to incorporate that vision into each unit or part of the organization, we can create a focus for the organization that will guide all parts of the organization. For example, if the library has as part of its shared vision of the future the seamless integration of print and electronic information, then a cataloging department will design a catalog that enables patrons to access both print and electronic information using the same system. Reference services will look for ways to implement an integrated information commons so patrons can use print and electronic resources together and can get assistance with all formats at one desk. With such a shared vision, the different units in the library will look for ways to complement each other's activities and truly collaborate to make the library more effective.

*Team learning* is another key component of the learning organization because teams are the fundamental learning unit (Senge, 1990a, p. 10). In team learning, members of the group must learn to suspend assumptions about how things are done and must act as colleagues, putting aside individual defensiveness to create an open environment for dialog and discussion. Working together as a team can produce more than the individual members can by themselves. Teams that do not promote learning, however, will not be as productive or as successful as those that are open to new ideas and work together to achieve their goals and objectives.

The fifth discipline that helps bring the concepts of the learning organization together is that of *systems thinking* (Senge, 1990a, p. 6). Systems thinking is the ability to see the bigger picture, to see the interrelationships of a system, to move beyond a simple cause and effect approach to seeing continuous processes. In systems thinking we move from seeing the individual parts of a system to understanding that the system is the interactions of those parts. Systems thinking brings the other four disciplines of a learning organization together in an integrated approach to examining and improving the organization.

Using systems thinking an organization can begin to see that familiar solutions no longer solve problems, that cause and effect are not closely related in time and space, that small changes can lead to big results, and that there is no blame. The individual, the cause of the problem, and the solution to the problem are all part of the same system. By looking at the system as a whole, we can begin to see new opportunities for solving problems and for implementing change.

## ROLE OF LEADERS IN THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION

The roles of leaders in organizations as designers, teachers, and stewards take on new meaning in a learning organization (Senge, 1990b, p. 10–13). As *designers* leaders are responsible for building a foundation of core values and organizational purpose. They are also responsible for ensuring that policies, strategies, and structure support core values and can be used to translate core values into business decisions. For example, if quality customer service is a core value, then policies need to reflect this value and should focus on customer service. Policies that simplify the process of renewing books online, for example, supports this core value of the organization. Policies that require patrons to follow arcane bureaucratic procedures would not support the core value. Leaders are responsible for evaluating organizational policies and strategies to be sure they have designed an organization that supports the core value of quality customer service.

The second role of leaders is that of *teacher*. This is not the authoritarian teacher of the past. It is not the model of the “sage on the stage.” Rather, in a learning organization the leader serves as a coach, “guiding from the side” to help people in the organization surface mental models, identify underlying assumptions, see patterns of behavior, and develop systems thinking approaches to problem solving. As a guide, leaders encourage growth, development, and true learning rather than emphasizing memorization of policies and blind application of procedures.

The third role of leaders is that of *steward*. Leaders are the stewards of the mission of the library. They are responsible for protecting the mission and ensuring that organizational values are understood and practiced. Leaders’ commitment to the higher purpose of the organization, to ethical behavior, and to supporting the members of the organization are all crucial aspects of the stewardship role. Without the commitment to maintaining the ethical core of the organization, leaders will be unable to create the culture of a learning organization.

## CREATING THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION

To implement a learning organization, libraries need to build a foundation based on an awareness of learning and create an environment that encourages openness. The organization’s leaders must be committed to the concepts of a learning organization, be willing to share power with employees, and be committed to promoting learning.

A first step in building this foundation is to understand how organizations learn. To begin the learning cycle, one first needs to be aware of the need to learn. With awareness, individuals can start to see the underlying structures of the organization and understand what forces are driving behavior. Employees can achieve this understanding by testing mental models, listening, and looking at data. Once employees begin to see the structure

of the organization, they can begin dialogues with team members about the patterns of meaning they find in the organization. They can develop an awareness of what is possible rather than being limited to what they currently know. From awareness they can begin to develop the skills and capabilities needed for change. They can begin to change because they want to change, not because they have been told they have to change. The organization begins to develop a shared vision of the future that will guide their efforts and the learning opportunities. They can begin to reflect on what they know and what they assume about the organization. As staff define their mental models they can begin to unearth assumptions that may be holding them back. Staff can create new conceptualizations of the organization and not be limited by past behavior. Finally, staff will begin to change their values and beliefs. They can let go of the belief that they need to be in control to be effective and learn to deal with ambiguity and uncertainty as forces that can help them be creative. Members of the organization can develop confidence in their teams, in their staff, in their fellow employees, and in their leaders. They can move from accidental strategies that promote learning to declared strategies that explicitly address the concepts of the learning organization.

### STRATEGIES FOR BECOMING A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

What kinds of strategies will help us become a learning organization? What steps can be taken to change our culture, vision, goals, and objectives to embrace learning as the foundation of what we do?

#### *Commit to Change*

First, an understanding that a learning organization is one that will thrive on change is necessary. Library staff cannot be afraid of changes or move halfheartedly along the path of learning. To become a learning organization we need to make a commitment to changing what we do and how we do it. All staff need to reframe their views of the organization, looking at problems from different angles and asking "what if" instead of talking about why the organization cannot succeed. The change process must be driven from the top levels of the organization. Managers must lead the change with a positive attitude and a clear vision.

#### *Connect Learning with the Organization's Operations*

Managers need to connect learning to the business operations. A learning organization is not about promoting learning for the sake of learning. It is about promoting learning to improve work processes and enhance services.

#### *Assess Organizational Capability*

An assessment of how well the organization can address the five disciplines is needed. Does the organization have the technology, people,



and knowledge necessary to encourage learning? Is the library prepared to provide the training necessary to teach people the skills they need to succeed?

*Communicate the Vision of a Learning Organization*

To succeed in making substantial changes in the organization, everyone needs to understand and commit to the vision of a learning organization. People need to understand the five disciplines of the learning organization and how they can practice these new skills.

*Demonstrate and Model a Commitment to Learning*

Organizations need to communicate the learning cycle by taking action, reviewing the action, evaluating the experience, and using the evaluation to plan the next steps. By understanding that learning is a continuous process and that individuals and groups learn from their mistakes, the library can encourage and support individual and team learning. The organization also needs an explicit plan for encouraging learning. Enhanced staff development programs, individual learning plans, and support for classes and workshops are among the tools an organization uses to model learning.

*Cut Bureaucracy and Streamline Structure*

Learning organizations are not likely to succeed in a top-down hierarchical organization. Flat structures that encourage interdepartmental activities and communication will promote learning. Limiting bureaucratic procedures will help promote creativity, encourage problem solving, and encourage thinking rather than mindless obedience to rules.

*Capture Learning and Share Knowledge*

Learning organizations succeed when knowledge is shared. Learning at all levels of the organization will encourage personal growth and mastery. Sharing that knowledge will allow the organization to benefit from individual and group learning and will promote growth and change.

*Reward Learning*

In addition to promoting and supporting learning, the organization must *reward learning* in order to succeed. Performance appraisals should include rewards for developing new skills, for teamwork, and for continuous personal development that supports organizational goals. When learning is rewarded people are more likely to adopt behaviors that support and promote learning activities.

*Learn More about Learning Organizations*

The concept of the learning organization is constantly developing. Learning organizations are not only about learning within the organization but also about improving and enhancing the concept of the learning organization. Staff need to look for ways to improve their understanding of learning as they are enhancing their own organization.



*Continuously Adapt, Improve, and Learn*

Achievement of the learning organization is a continuous process of growth, change, and improvement. The organization becomes stronger as it changes, meets new challenges, incorporates new technologies, provides enhanced services, and meets the challenge of an ever-changing information environment.

## LEARNING ORGANIZATION EXPERIENCES

How can a library take the concepts of a learning organization and turn them into a practical strategy for managing the operation? Reports in the literature provide some advice to organizations considering the learning organization model. Still, the literature on learning organizations in the library and information science field varies in content. Some articles describe libraries as learning organizations in theory, and others question whether college or university libraries can become learning organizations (Rowley, 1997; Marcum, 1996). Articles question whether the library as a learning organization is just the next fad for the field (Worrell, 1995). Editorials in *College and Research Libraries* and *Research Strategies* challenge readers to commit to making the library a learning organization and ask whether some libraries might already be learning organizations (Riggs, 1997; Wittkopf, 1995). Most of these articles discuss learning organizations and libraries in general rather than providing specific examples. Little information in print exists regarding particular libraries and their efforts at becoming learning organizations. A few articles can be found on learning organization efforts at the University of Arizona (Bender, 1997), the North Suburban Library System (Hayes, Sullivan, & Baaske, 1999), and a pilot collaborative collections management project for California academic libraries organized by the University of California and Stanford University libraries (Hightower & Soete, 1995). Some library Web sites (for example, that of the University of Maryland Libraries) include information about efforts to become a learning organization (Baughman & Hubbard, 2001). Additionally, Maryland's Web site includes criteria for assessment of the learning organization effort and content areas for a learning and education program related to the learning organization philosophy.

## THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA—LINCOLN EXPERIENCE

The move to a learning organization at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln Libraries (UNL) began in 1996. The dean of the Libraries, with strong support from the Libraries' administrative committee, led the effort. The Libraries built this effort on a long-standing foundation of planning that included the development of a vision statement and creation of strategic goals and objectives. To begin the move toward a learning organization, the Libraries refreshed the vision statement and simplified it to "seamless integration of print and electronic information in a flexible environment."

In developing a shared understanding of the vision, the vision statement was expanded to include information and services. The understanding is that the Libraries are working to integrate new technologies, formats, and services into the whole organization in order to meet patron needs rather than establishing new, separate units to handle electronic information and services. In this vision no staff member or librarian would be left behind in a marginalized unit. Everyone needed to be a part of the vision, working to move the Libraries forward.

Once the vision was updated, the Libraries began a program of teaching staff about learning organizations and identifying skills they would need as the Libraries grew and changed. To identify those skills, a committee made up of representatives from all staff groups in the Libraries developed a list of core competencies for library staff. These original core competencies have evolved during recent years as the University of Nebraska adopted system-wide competencies for all staff. Core competencies have served well as both a tool for hiring and a plan for staff development. Staff development programs designed to teach core competencies have included presentations on communication skills, a hands-on workshop on creativity, a panel discussion on flexibility/adaptability, and presentations on generational differences in the workplace.

In October of 1996 Dr. Martha Hale, then director of the library school at Emporia State University, visited UNL and introduced the learning organization principles to library faculty and staff. Additional sessions revolved around improving communication and conflict resolution skills. All staff participated in these two-day workshops on skill building to promote group learning and sharing information. Since a key component of a learning organization is group learning and sharing, it was imperative that staff have the skills to succeed in these efforts. Since that first set of programs, the Libraries has offered many training programs and staff development opportunities for library staff and faculty related to the five disciplines of the learning organization.

#### *Personal Mastery*

A significant amount of learning takes place at the individual level. *Personal mastery*, one of the five learning organization disciplines, requires that individuals accept the personal responsibility of seeking learning opportunities in order to move forward in their work life. The Libraries encourages individual learning and has offered programs on independent learning and self-mastery to encourage staff to seek out learning opportunities. Opportunities for learning and examples of successful learning are shared with coworkers. During the first years of the Libraries' movement toward becoming a learning organization, staff at all levels were actively encouraged to take time each week to learn something new. For many staff during the first years of the learning organization, this meant learning new computer

skills and developing Internet searching skills. In more recent years library staff members' learning opportunities have varied widely depending on their job duties and responsibilities, as well as their professional interests.

The Libraries has also sponsored programs on independent learning and self-mastery. Individuals were encouraged to ask themselves the following questions:

- What do I want to accomplish this year?
- What do I want to accomplish during the next few years?
- What assets do I have to help accomplish this?
- What obstacles are in my way?
- What do I need from the Libraries or from the University to help?
- What do I need my supervisor to do to help?
- What is my pattern of failure?
- What danger signs should I watch for (or ask my supervisor and colleagues to watch for)?

Follow-up programming included case studies of individuals who evaluated their own circumstances and made changes to move positively in a new direction. These case studies included famous Nebraskans (former football coach and now congressman Tom Osborne, former governor Bob Kerrey), as well as the stories of some library staff members. Library staff then investigated their own individual strengths and developed personal inventories of subjects they knew something about and would like to learn more about, as well as lists of subjects they knew little or nothing about but would like to learn more about because it would be helpful in their work. The Libraries encourages opportunities for personal mastery through staff sharing, committee membership and work, a campus mentoring program, staff development workshops, and library-sponsored computer skills/training courses, as well as flexible scheduling for staff interested in taking campus classes.

Other staff development and training efforts have included presentations on time management, meeting skills, ergonomics, and environmental health and safety, as well as sessions on coping with change, building resiliency during difficult times (budget cuts), harassment training, and disaster preparedness.

### *Group Learning*

While all library staff and faculty have been encouraged to attend the above programs, learning also takes place at the group and organizational levels. Faculty, administrators, middle managers, frontline staff, supervisors of students, public services staff, technical services staff, and particular departments and units are all groups that benefit from specific training tailored to their needs. Training efforts aimed at these groups have included programs on specific computer/technical skills, project management,

organizational culture, and partnerships and collaborations. Supervisory training has included sessions on how to do evaluations, decision-making, corrective action, family and medical leave, meeting facilitation, and search committee certification.

### *NUValues*

Since 1996 the University of Nebraska campuses (Lincoln, Omaha, Kearney, and the Medical Center) have adopted a new personnel compensation and classification system, *NUValues*, for all university employees except for faculty. In the Libraries this includes all library staff except for librarians. The basic premise for *NUValues* is that job classification is simplified, with fewer levels or bands. Individuals can take on new responsibilities and move within a band much more easily than in more rigid classification systems. Along with this more flexible system comes a responsibility for the Libraries to provide additional and tailored individual and group learning opportunities for library staff.

The move to the new personnel system has meshed well with the learning organization model because the new system emphasizes skill building and learning as the basis for salary increases rather than seniority or rank. Now the reward system is more closely linked to the efforts of the Libraries to become a learning organization.

### *Mental Models and Systems Thinking*

The Libraries are now working on addressing the disciplines of mental models and systems thinking. A major restructuring effort has just been completed, changing the Libraries from a seven-department structure to a four-department structure. The merger of units, elimination of some units, and four changes in department chair positions means staff will need to reassess their assumptions about how their work group operates. This is a perfect time, then, to do training on identifying assumptions and surfacing mental models. The restructuring is also giving the Libraries the opportunity to revisit the ideas of systems thinking as people shift how they view the organization.

### *Results to Date*

How can the Libraries measure how well the implementation of the learning organization is going? Besides reviewing the evaluation from staff development programs and revisiting training efforts to determine skill levels, the Libraries has recently participated in a campus-wide survey by the Gallup Corporation. The survey includes questions pertaining to the following:

- How often do staff have an opportunity to do their best each day?
- How clear are expectations?
- How often do staff get to learn something new?

The results for the Libraries showed that most staff rated the Libraries as excellent or very good on these key learning organization concepts. In fact, the Libraries rated higher than most academic departments on these measures. These independent results helped show the progress that has been made and opened the door for unit-based conversations on how to continue to improve.

## CONCLUSION

The learning organization model is one way that libraries can design organizations that are successful in rapidly changing environments. The key elements of a learning organization as espoused in the five disciplines of personal mastery, shared vision, group learning, mental models, and systems thinking provide libraries with the tools needed to create flexible, agile organizations. By developing a shared vision and promoting group and individual learning, libraries can create staffs that are committed to finding the best ways to fulfill the organization's mission, goals, and objectives. By surfacing mental models and promoting systems thinking the organization can help unlock individual creativity, help staff move past perceived barriers, and assist everyone in embracing and creating positive change. By adopting the learning organization model, then, libraries can build paths for individuals that will lead to success and help libraries thrive in times of change.

As we found at UNL the learning organization model has helped the organization adapt to a changing environment. Staff have the skills to adjust to a new organizational structure and to new working relationships within their units. They see learning as a way to address change and to explore new ideas. They are learning to review their assumptions about how the organization functions and to look for ways to improve the organization by changing whole processes and systems.

Further research is needed on how best to implement the five disciplines of the learning organization within any particular culture. The processes that worked at UNL can provide ideas on how to address the key concepts. However, organizations will need to learn their own ways to bring learning organization ideas into their environments and to create effective organizations that are willing to change.

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